

# Misunderstood Masterpieces—Metallica's Metallica

Consistency is a word that has never quite been part of Metallica's vocabulary. Their self-titled album was released in 1991, marking a decade since their inception. Each of the five albums in their discography at the time stood as a shining example of their ability to reinvent themselves.

In this span of time, they overhauled the very tenets of thrash metal with debut **Kill 'Em All**—showing their peers that approaching one's instrument with blinding speed was not key to expressing rage and aggression. By incorporating melody and slowing down the tempo to bring out the intricacies in your music, this gruesome emotion could be transformed into a thing of beauty.

Their second album, **Ride The Lightning**, brought them infamy with **Fade To Black**. A ballad, laden with lyrics of self-introspection and acoustic guitars—was played before an audience by then acclimated to songs about Satanism and rebellion against the establishment.



*The sacred first four Metallica albums*

It comes as no surprise, then, that **Metallica** or **The Black Album** as it came to be known, had very big shoes to fill. Only five years had passed since the untimely demise of beloved bassist Cliff Burton in a tour bus accident where he was the sole casualty. Rather than taking time out to grieve and process their feelings, the band instead elected to find a replacement and dive head-first into the studio.

This resulted in **...And Justice For All**, their most technically complex record till date, boasting unpredictable time signature changes and tracks nearly doubled in length. The purpose of doing so was abundantly clear. As Cliff's songwriting presence began to predominate on the previous two albums, Metallica started to have increasingly progressive inclinations in their music. Far from being brought up on a diet of metal, he harboured a passion for classical music as well, and this showed in his keen instinct for harmony.

He passed on his learnings in this skill to his fellow band mates during his tenure in Metallica. Thus, '...And Justice For All' became a way for them to prove—more to themselves than

anyone else—that they were still capable of making intelligently composed music, even without Cliff.



Metallica with Cliff Burton. L to R:  
Kirk Hammett, Lars Ulrich, James  
Hetfield, and Cliff

Though nobody knew what to expect from *The Black Album*, it would be safe to say that Metallica held monopoly over the world of metal at the time of its release. It is important to know the nature of the environment that this album was born into. Metal music was the predominating genre of the late '80s, and Metallica had shot over all their contemporaries to become a household name.

Their contemporaries were enjoying moderate amounts of success, but they were on a different level altogether. Scrapping their tour bus in favour of a private jet, they were constantly traversing the Atlantic Ocean—headlining concerts for stadiums full of people on either side. While the grunge scene was very much steadily on the rise, Metallica knew they had a fan base of thrashing sharks more than people. They needed a fix—to violently flounder their heads and writhe their bodies to—but they hadn't been fed in the last three years, and were chomping at the bit.

Stylistic changes were definitely on the agenda for this much-

awaited album. It goes without saying, however, that they could not stray too far from their metal roots without shaking the very foundations of their following.



*Hetfield surveys his kingdom. Day on the Green, 1985.*

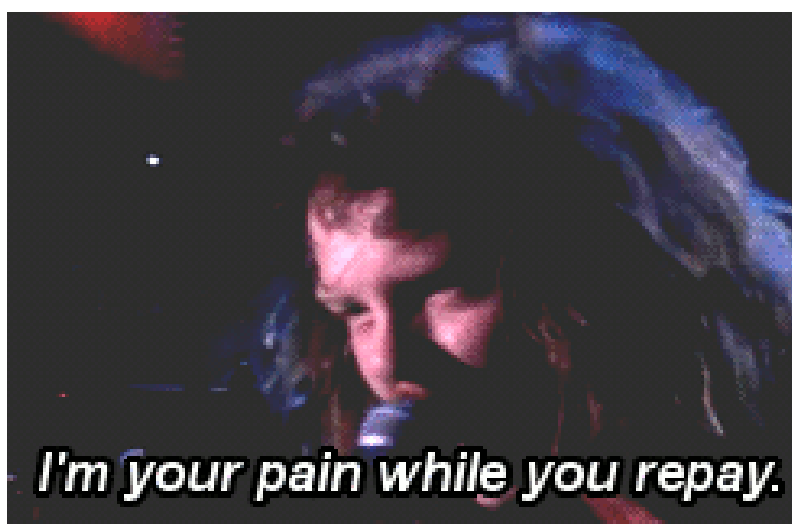
On this forefront, *The Black Album* stormed onto the scene, with a determination to deliver. Record stores were packed the night before its release, the curiosity of fans only stoked further by its plain black cover. The band had mentioned in a statement that they opted out of any cover art this time, as they wanted nothing to draw the listener's attention away from the music.

So when long-haired teenagers would put the cassette in their cars—adrenaline coursing through their veins as they scowled through gritted teeth—they were not going to be disappointed. **Sad But True** paves the way for the path ahead with just a single down-tuned power chord. The distinctive tone of the guitar—muddy with a domineering presence—leaves no doubt in mind with every second that he holds down this rearing beast. This could only be the work of James Hetfield.

Not one to be left behind, Lars locks in on the drums, with a perfectly-timed slam of his snare to meet every strike of

James' guitar. As his sticks dexterously roll across the kit in a frenzied fill—rocks crumble into cracks on the earth—the devastation left in their wake after this assault on our senses.

The main riff picks up from where this quake left off, hauling this behemoth along in one seemingly never-ending breakdown. James dredges up feelings most of us prefer to keep vaulted deep within, unless unwillingly exposed by a vulnerable moment. He narrates a conversation with the side of our conscience that knows no boundaries—cares not that our actions may have consequences—and only seeks instant gratification.



*"...you know it's Sad But True"*

By this point, two things have become abundantly clear. Producer Bob Rock, most well-known for his work with glam rock bands like Motley Crue, had taught James Hetfield how to sing. When word spread that Metallica would be working with him for the first time on this album—suspicions ran high that this would be a commercial album, full of radio singles. Metal purists—who swore by Metallica's as yet flawless track record—lost sleep over thoughts of the founding fathers of thrash metal transforming into a hair band overnight.

When asked about this in interviews, James had one simple reply. If working with Bob meant that he would turn them into

Motley Crue, would Flemming Rasmussen (Metallica's longest-standing producer till then) be able to make the Crue sound like Metallica? For reasons not quite known, Hetfield's voice had been changing with every album. This could be attributed to his alcoholism and screaming at the top of his lungs at every show for the last 10 years.

In any case, this change worked in his favour, for his voice now sounded deeper and more mature. It was only in the natural progression of things, then, to teach him how to sing in key. This lent his voice the capability of increasing the blend of emotions it can contribute to the music, allowing more room for melody.



*Producer Bob Rock shares a lighter moment with James and Lars in the studio.*

Secondly, this album was responsible for the guitarist community's present-day association of lead guitarist Kirk Hammett with the distortion pedal. Kept under wraps for the most part, he'd only revealed his penchant for using the "wah" effect in certain moments of brilliance.

In his solo on **Battery** in **Master of Puppets**, the thick distortion as he ran up and down a scale, ascending incrementally in pitch each time, played the strings of our hearts like streaks of sunlight after a storm. On The Black

Album, he insists that his excessive usage of distortion was not to mask any insecurities.

It was because, in his opinion, the wah brings out the emotion he is trying to convey, in a much stronger vein. To prove his point, **Holier Than Thou** announces its entry with a twin guitar attack. James works that picking hand with everything he's got, palm-muting this riff that trudges authoritatively along in powerful, intermittent bursts.

Rather than join him, Kirk lumbers out from beneath the abyss. Tides churn, waves ripple on the surface, a gnarled, seaweed-covered hand pokes out from the void, and feels solid ground for the first time. The groaning of Kirk's distortion alerts all present of his awakening. If you found James fearsome by himself, now in the company of his shadow as it rises up from behind him—dwarfing everything around—he has become truly invincible.



*Hetfield and Hammett in action*

This song was a ballistic missile of contempt aimed straight for their detractors. Making no attempts at hiding under the guise of metaphors, James pulls no punches when he tells them to worry about themselves instead. A blasé “YEAH, who the hell are you?” forays into his own brief rhythm guitar solo that once again brings guitar interplay into the picture as it

opens directly into another one by Kirk.

The increased presence of James shouting his trademark "Yeah!"s on this album is yet another way Bob Rock added his production flair to this album. Initially, the band was wary of his presence in the studio, refusing to take in any input. He had been reduced to a bystander, and this was causing tension to mount.

When he finally managed to get through, he pointed out that the rawness of their stage presence cannot be felt on their studio albums. A Metallica show in the '80s and early '90s was unlike anything experienced ever before or since. The camaraderie between the band members showed that they truly lived off the energy of their own music.

Jason's lashing his hair about in a windmill as his hands worked the bass without him even looking at it was no act of display. He was lost in the moment, and needed to let loose. It was no secret that Lars lived to be under the spotlight—and had been practicing drums religiously since Metallica's rise to prominence to give the audience the show they wanted.

Nothing could compare, however, to those "YEAH"s James roared into the mic. His frame towers over the stand as he leans back to play his monstrous riffs, hands sliding across the fretboard. A sly grin spreads across his face, while his eyes—blue as the ocean—reveal a furnace of rage crackling within. Bob wanted to capture this insanity on record, so he encouraged the band to play on record as they would on stage. It was a tactic that proved to be a masterstroke.



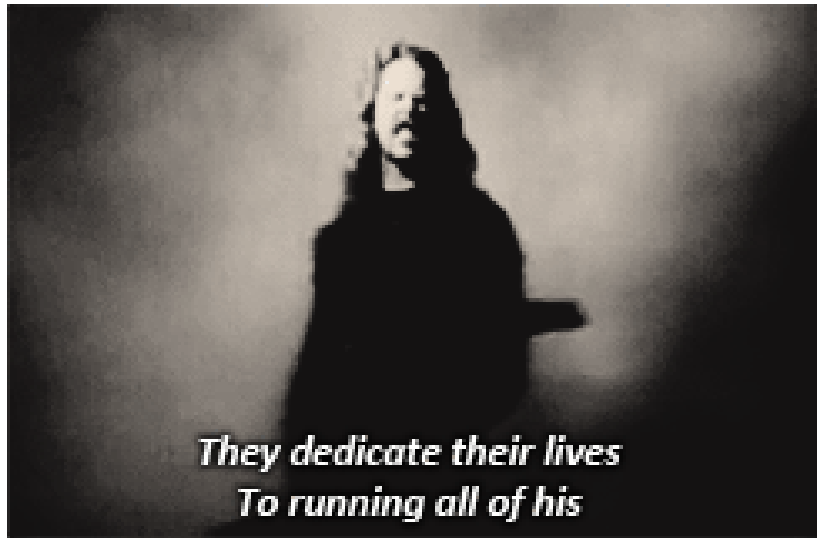


*Metallica's line-up from 1987-2001,  
featuring Jason Newsted*

Up next we have **The Unforgiven**, the track that made this album what it was. A track without which Metallica might not have entered the lives of many. The first of a three-part series, it brought tears to the eyes of lonely souls on nights that felt merciless, even when the sun was still out.

Not to be mistaken for a cry borne out of misery or self-pity, the sobs this evokes are the kind that make your heart feel lighter when they're done. The kind that—for however fleeting a moment—allow your mind to wander away from what's burdening it down and hope for a better tomorrow.

The beauty of this song is that it isn't sad throughout. You don't empathise with it because the singer is droning on about some tragedy that befell him. It preys, instead, on your anger. James is portraying an old man lying on his deathbed, reflecting on a life spent living for others.



"He tries to please them all, this bitter man he is"

Thus, if you're an older person listening to this song, it opens up scars you had hoped would fade away with time. If you discovered this in your adolescence, it forces you to confront your reality head-on. You know there's no escape, you need to make a change. You need to find your own happiness—before this relentless rat race of pleasing your elders imposed on you since birth—finally swallows you whole.

They say they know what's best, that they have experience you lack. Life holds no certainties, and it's always safer to tread the beaten path. But without taking risks, dealing with failure, learning from it, and enjoying the occasional victory, are we living at all?

A crowning moment in the instrumental section of this song has to be Kirk's solo, and the guitar work beneath it. Starting off in a moment of self-reflection—the subdued lamenting makes everything else fade into the background—as the spotlight shines only on him.

Gradually, it builds momentum, like someone who's done feeling sorry for themselves and wants to get back up on their feet. That's when he switches from clean to distorted guitar and lets those strings have it—making them wail with every

bend-sending shockwaves your way with every power chord. Beneath all this, James harmonises with an uplifting melody, like falling into your mother's arms and being told everything is going to be all right. For some inexplicable reason, the conviction in her words makes you want to believe it's true.



Hetfield, in his true capacity as a Norse god

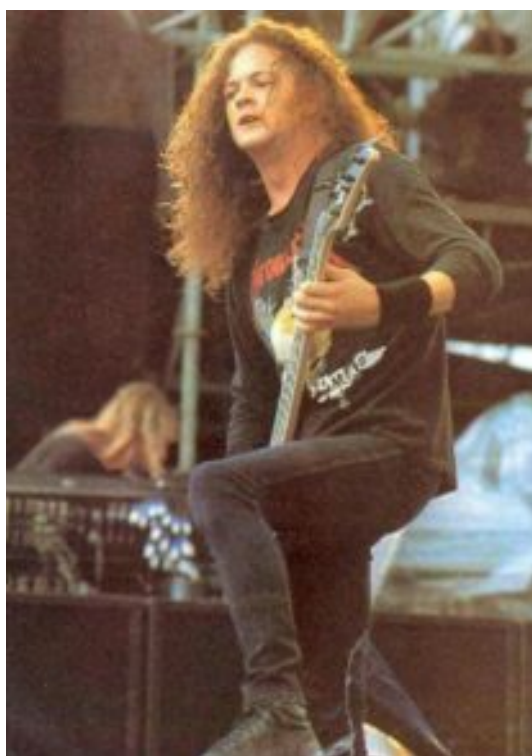
Those who have made it to the second half of this journey are rewarded with yet another timeless Metallica track, **The God That Failed**. It's no secret that bassists are seldom given their due in metal. This is precisely why Cliff Burton is held in such high regard. Such was the fortitude of his skill that he not only held his own, but stood out from the rest of his band, *despite* being a bassist.

Jason Newsted paid the price for no mistake of his own on '...And Justice For All', when the bass volume was turned down to barely audible levels. Some speculated that this was simply because the man playing it was not Cliff. Others defended James and Lars in this decision, saying that the guitars had a natural bass effect which warranted the move to minimise interference.

This song was the first time his bass really got the chance to breathe. It was well-known that Jason came from a pedigree in thrash metal. Where Cliff would lay some heavy distortion on

his bass to make it sound like a very deep electric guitar and use it to tell a story, Jason would much rather hammer out some banging riffs, and get the crowd to go wild.

In other words, he was the antithesis to Cliff. The **Whiplash** to Cliff's **Anesthesia**. We get a glimpse of this when he opens the song with a steady trot of his pick along the strings. A deep rumbling that briefly increases in pitch before going back down again gives the hair-raising sensation of danger lurking nearby.



*Jason Newsted, the man who put the "metal" in Metallica*

As if to confirm these fears, James and Kirk recreate the bass riff together, in a higher harmony. This is made more devastating by holding the last note, as if confronted by a predator on their haunches, but not yet willing to pounce and get the deed over with.

The rest of the song is carried by one powerful riff throughout, another component in how this album exemplified

creating simplistic yet beautiful metal music. Oftentimes, progressive albums the likes of '...And Justice For All' may feature tracks with five groundbreaking riffs all crammed into one. However, this robs the listener of the experience of appreciating them all, because there are simply too many to process at a time.

Coming back to the song, it has a deeply personal significance to James. As a child, he was subjected to watching his mother waste away from cancer, and being helpless to do anything about it because his parents were Scientific Christians. Meaning, they didn't believe in medical treatment, they were of the belief that God would heal all their illnesses.

When that failed to happen, and she eventually succumbed to this disease, he felt betrayed. Where was this God his parents placed so much faith in? What did he do to deserve losing his own mother? This deception from someone he placed on such a high pedestal made him resentful.



*Accepting the Grammy for Best Heavy Metal Performance in 1992.*

He began to ridicule others who were blinded by their devotion to God. There comes a time when we must accept that the events in our lives are consequences of our own doings. This applies

to both positive and negative outcomes. It is pointless to look to someone else for an explanation of why things are the way they are.

This is a moment of realization that cannot be adequately expressed in words, which is why Kirk chooses to do so with his guitar instead. Every bent note, brought up gently so you can feel the pain, is a question. Why? Why me? Why did you do this to me?

Then, he skips rapidly between the higher-pitched "e" and lower "B" strings to give birth to this beautiful progression of notes. We all like to believe ourselves to be strong, independent individuals. However, there is no denying the soothing effect a simple pat on the shoulder can have during times of duress. That is what this harmony feels like, the validating touch of someone who understands.

The backlash this album received from metal elitists certainly took nothing away from the fact that it is a quality piece of music, regardless of genre. If the members of Metallica were asked how they feel about this album, one can be certain they would look at it with nothing but the utmost fondness. After all, they toured the world twice in a span of four years solely for its promotion. If anything can be learned from this, it's that we ought to give music a chance for ourselves before dismissing it based on other's opinions.